

social research

AN INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Social Research*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (FALL 1990), pp. 571-577

Published by: [The New School](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970602>

Accessed: 01/06/2012 14:21

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Socialism and Capitalism, Left and Right

BY STEVEN LUKES

JEFFREY GOLDFARB asks a very challenging question—or rather two: “Are there any longer significant differences between left and right, and between socialism and capitalism?” He rightly sees these questions as having been raised, or rendered more acute, by the revolutions of 1989 and the current transformations taking place in the Soviet Union, and by the collapse of communism and anticommunism. I shall first comment on his way of posing the questions and his answers to them; and then I shall try to offer some answers of my own.

Goldfarb offers a “new end-of-ideology thesis,” which records, welcomes, and supports the rejection of “a totalitarian culture, with ideological politics, scientistic utopias, and complete resolutions to complex societal problems,” of “veils of ignorance and illusion” which “rationalized political actions, but had little to do with solving human problems or promoting human creativity.” Essential to ideology, thus understood, were its “easy dichotomies” that have “defined a great deal of our political, economic, and sociological expert opinion and common sense.” We must, says Goldfarb, “struggle to overcome them” and discard the old “either/or ideological map” according to which “a country is either free or it is totalitarian; it is either a democracy or a dictatorship; it is either capitalist or socialist (or ‘communistic’).”

Now, it is striking that, for Goldfarb, these are the dichotomies characteristic of the now-anachronistic ideologies

of modern times, but that they do not include the dichotomy of left and right. More specifically, Goldfarb says that the old distinction of capitalism and socialism does "not hold," while that between left and right does not hold "in the same way." Why? Why does he see the distinction between capitalism and socialism as an ideological veil of ignorance and illusion rationalizing political action, but continue to *use* the distinction between left and right, speaking of the "political project of the left" as very much alive in contemporary Poland, despite indigenous denials, of the struggle of Havel, Michnik, and Konrad as being "ultimately from the left," of there being "responsible leftist and rightist positions" concerning the central questions of politics throughout East Central Europe, and of the need for the left ("they [we]") "to explore how the grand principles and traditions of the left can be realized without depending upon ideological certitudes"?

The answer, I take it, is that for Goldfarb both "capitalism" and "socialism" are cardinal instances of discredited and thus useless political rhetoric. "Socialism" in particular, he argues, following Havel, is a word to be mistrusted, but neither term can plausibly name "ideals in the political-normative sense," for they are "too intimately implicated in modern horror, and too remotely and/or ambiguously related to that which still does distinguish the political left from the political right."

What, according to Goldfarb, is that? He gives only a few clues to an answer. The left is, he says, concerned with "democracy and political independence" and it places a "special emphasis upon democracy and social justice" while the right stresses "nation, social discipline, and efficiency." His argument is that, under the conditions of the new, Central European post-totalitarian politics, it (the left) can express and pursue these commitments without being obliged to defend and promote "socialism" (or "capitalism"), free, that is, of "the framework of the socialist-capitalist typology." He also holds that the same can, and should, become the norm in the West.

I have several comments to make on this analysis. First, I

agree, of course, that “socialism” has become widely discredited as a term of political discourse in East Central Europe, but I do not observe that “capitalism” has. They are not *both* seen there as “intimately implicated in modern horror.” Only “socialism” is. I am not convinced that the “socialist-capitalist” typology has been widely rejected; on the contrary, it is still widely deployed as various attempts are made to slough off what is seen as the socialist past.

There is, however, a much more straightforward reason why “socialism” has been so discredited: that it can no longer be plausibly seen as identifying a viable, alternative type of socioeconomic system that can claim to be superior to capitalism in any significant respect. W. Brus and L. Lasky entitled their recent book *From Marx to the Market: Socialism in Search of an Economic System* (Oxford University Press, 1989). The search is fruitless, for there is no alternative system to capitalism that incorporates its virtues while exhibiting others.

As for Goldfarb’s account of what still distinguishes the political left from the political right, it seems to me that it is not helpful—indeed, it can be misleading—to say that leftists favor social justice and democracy while rightists stress values such as nationalism, social discipline, and efficiency. Not all rightists disfavor social justice and democracy, as they understand them (Hayek, of course, denounces the former as a “mirage,” but then so of course did Marx). Leftists have been known to favor nationalism, social discipline, and efficiency. These are abstract values that cut across the entire political spectrum and are the distinctive property of no part of it: though they are susceptible of left- and right-wing understandings.

What answers, then, should be given to Goldfarb’s questions about the real, or supposed, oppositions between socialism and capitalism, and between left and right? How, in 1990, are we to understand their meaning? Do they still have meanings? And if so, to what extent do their meanings overlap?

In the first place, I have already suggested that socialism can no longer be considered as an alternative socioeconomic

system that is viable and superior to capitalism. This inductive conclusion seems inescapable, if one considers both the overall record of socialist economies in the developed and developing world and the attempts to reform them from within. Which is not to say that capitalism is anywhere an unqualified success story, or to deny the strength of socialist (and other) critiques of its internal structural and cultural contradictions and market failures, or to underestimate the human costs of these, in the streets of Rio and New York, or in the peripheral and the deindustrialized regions of the world. What is also inescapable, however, is the sheer *range* of capitalisms, all the way from Chile and South Africa to Austria and Sweden, as compared with the similarity of socialisms. The difference between the most similar capitalist systems is far greater than that between the most dissimilar socialist systems, in mode of functioning, type of political regime, and the impact of both on the culture of everyday life. Perhaps all of this can best be summed up by adapting Tolstoy: all socialisms fail in the same way; every capitalism succeeds and fails after its own fashion.

From which I think we should henceforth conclude that the future of socialism, if it has one, can only lie within capitalism, and it can only consist in one or another version of social democracy. As Goldfarb indicates, there are those, such as Milton Friedman, but also many in the East, who see this as only the human face of communism; and it is, of course, traditional among Western socialists of the "left" to denigrate social democracy as mere taming and trimming of capitalism. But this is to take over the old Marxist assumption that distributive and redistributive questions that concern welfare and consumption are merely secondary to the realities of ownership and production relations. To the contrary, we might, in the best case, look forward to new and innovative forms of capitalism in East Central Europe, which in effect take seriously what remains of the socialist project, through various forms of collective provision and attention to public goods and collective consumption. Whether this will be

thought of as “socialist” will, I believe and hope, matter less and less as history unfolds.

I imagine that Goldfarb would agree with me that such an outcome would be one that “the left” should be ready to welcome. But what, assuming we do so agree, would we mean by “the left”?

In continuing to use the concept of the left, and to identify with it, Goldfarb sees it in terms of “grand principles and traditions” which can be defended and renewed in an ideology-free environment. As I have already suggested, it will not do to define these principles and traditions in terms of democracy and social justice. Various kinds of right, after all, have their own visions of both. What we need, rather, is an account of what is distinctive of a left-wing view of democracy and social justice.

I believe that such an account must return to the origins of the left—and of the left-right opposition in politics—in the Estates-General of 1789, when political groupings first divided in this way, thereby creating a new way of dividing political space. Such an account would, I imagine, when fully worked out, reveal a rich tapestry of different shades and tendencies, but two threads would be central.

One is the republican ideal of equal citizenship—of a community of free and equal citizens committed to public argument and debate over political alternatives. The other is what we may call the “rectification principle”: this requires the progressive rectifying of involuntary disadvantage, and the continual seeking out of new kinds and new sources of inequality. It began with the franchise but then progressively encompassed constitutional rights, and later economic, social, cultural, gender-based, regional, and other forms of inequality. The first principle presumes formal equality, to which it seeks to give substance; the second presupposes real inequalities, which it seeks to overcome. In short, as a historical tradition, we may say that the left incorporates a dynamic that has followed the logic of these two principles in combination:

to make formal equalities more real, and to make real inequalities more equal.

Notice that both principles have a universalistic thrust, though in different ways. The dynamic of the rectification principle is essentially boundary-crossing. It moves, not only from income distribution to educational opportunity to racial discrimination to gender inequality, but also from inequalities within the nation-state to those on a global scale. If rectification is to take place within a nation-state, what possible case can be made for the maldistribution of the world's resources? The republican principle, by contrast, is universalistic, not in application (for citizens must always be citizens of somewhere in the world, not of the world) but rather in *form*: citizens are required to judge political alternatives according to *reasons* which anyone upon due reflection can accept—reasons which they can publicly offer to one another and acknowledge as compelling, independently of their particular interests or commitments or traditions.

Sometimes the left in history has deviated sharply from the ideal-typical left I have sought to describe—by abandoning the republican principle in practice (as with the Jacobins and the Bolsheviks) or by getting locked into the mere defense of past rectifications and abandoning the overall project of seeking to remedy further sources of involuntary disadvantage. The “true left” pursues both principles. Its project is the combined realization of both, in the face of various kinds of nonleft or “right”: traditionalists seeking to preserve hierarchies and reactionaries to restore old ones; particularists seeking to impose a particular communal form on society, thereby arresting the dynamic or rectification and equating effective citizenship with ethnicity or nationality or religion; technocrats who devalue the public sphere and civil society and libertarians and neoconservatives who denounce the very project of the left as social engineering and who deny the very possibility, let alone the desirability, of rectification as the pursuit of a mirage lying along the road to serfdom.

This, I believe, is a way of seeing the left as significantly different from the right, in its various forms, that could give it both an honorable past and a viable future, in both East and West. It seems all too likely that, as the postcommunist regimes of East Central Europe start to institute economic and social measures that bite deep, the left, understood in this way, will have a future.